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KT photo | Tim Bath

House of Burgess: RIP MCA: ‘It’s called gratitude’

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

On May 4, I felt like one of my childhood friends died.

When I heard that Adam Nathaniel “MCA” Yauch, bassist and MC of the legendary New York City-based band the Beastie Boys, had passed away after a three-year battle against cancer of the salivary gland at the age of 47, a piece of my innocence left with him.

It’s been almost a month, but it still hurts. I was totally unprepared for this news.

I feel sort of silly even writing a column about this because I don't think I'm saying anything original. I've read a number of heartfelt tributes to Yauch over the last few weeks and they all pretty much said a version of what I'm about to. But I feel I have to say it anyway. I think that just goes to show the depth of his influence on music lovers my age and a little older.

Though Yauch's death is a singular event, I regard it as the end of the entire group. Even more than many other collectives, the Beastie Boys worked in unison, each member as important as the other. I don't even know how a replacement would work. Even so, to my ears, MCA always had the most recognizable voice of any of the Beasties. His husky, authoritative growl stuck out for me far more than Mike D and Ad-Rock, who at times could sound nearly interchangeable.

The effect the Beastie Boys had and continue to have on popular culture is immeasurable. From the time their debut album "Licensed To Ill" was released in 1986, they've simultaneously existed on their own musical planet while subtly influencing everything around them. Hip-hop may be the dominant musical art form of our times nowadays, but 26 years ago that was hardly the case. And when the Beasties dropped their sophomore effort "Paul's Boutique" three years later, they basically defined sampling as a legitimate form of expression.

And Yauch's influence didn't stop there. Under the pseudonym Nathaniel Hörnblowér, he directed many of the band's most hilarious music videos. He used the format to devastating effect, making fun of trashy popular culture at every turn including '70s cop shows in "Sabotage" and Godzilla movies in "Intergalactic."

But the Beastie Boys were just as easy to dismiss because they were so ubiquitous. When I was growing up, having an opinion on the Beastie Boys was like having an opinion on a rainbow or a sunny day. Yeah it's good. And? If you're under 40 and someone asks you what kind of music you like, and your response is something along the lines of: "Everything, as long as its good," then you owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Beastie Boys.

I was a skinny, white middle school student living in Mitchell when I bought my first hip hop album: The Beastie Boys' "Check Your Head." As soon as the album's first track, "Jimmy James," started thumping through my cheap, black, plastic speakers, I was floored. I had never heard anything like it before. I can still repeat tossed-off skits from that album verbatim without even thinking about it all these years later.

Thank you for making this world so much more fun, MCA. I'll never forget you.

- Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor, may be reached by calling 765-454-8577 or via email at rob.burgess@kokomotribune.com.